Unit .35

Session .03

Living in Grace

Scripture

Philemon 8-22

8 For this reason, although I have great boldness in
Christ to command you to do what is right, **9** I appeal
to you, instead, on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an
elderly man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus,
10 appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I became his
father while I was in chains. **11** Once he was useless
to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.
12 I am sending him back to you—I am sending my
very own heart. **13** I wanted to keep him with me,
so that in my imprisonment for the gospel he might
serve me in your place. **14** But I didn't want to do
anything without your consent, so that your good deed
might not be out of obligation, but of your own free
will. **15** For perhaps this is why he was separated from
you for a brief time, so that you might get him back
permanently, **16** no longer as a slave, but more than
a slave—as a dearly loved brother. He is especially so
to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh
and in the Lord. **17** So if you consider me a partner,
welcome him as you would me. **18** And if he has
wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge
that to my account. **19** I, Paul, write this with my
own hand: I will repay it—not to mention to you that
you owe me even your very self. **20** Yes, brother, may
I benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in
Christ. **21** Since I am confident of your obedience, I
am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more
than I say. **22** Meanwhile, also prepare a guest room
for me, since I hope that through your prayers I will be
restored to you.

Intro Options

Main Point:
The gospel calls us to treat each other like family.

Remember, this icon means there is a Leader Pack item that goes with the lesson. See Leader Pack for additional instructions.

Option 1

Break your students into small groups. Assign each group one of three words: love, family, or grace. Each group should compose a quick scene (either a skit, a frozen pantomime, or a drawing) depicting the word they got. Have them prepare and share their scenes.

Debrief afterward: What are their ideas of love, family, and grace? If someone had seen these scenes without knowing what they were, would they think of Christians? If the groups were supposed to make a scene of "Christian community" (if you have time, have them make such scenes), would those scenes look similar or dissimilar to the scenes they did for love, family, and grace?

In today's session, we'll see that love, family, and grace are three marks that should characterize Christian community. Let's consider how to live out these words in community as we look at the text.

Option 2

Tell students they are to make short stories entitled, "Making Peace from Broken Pieces." Their stories should have several distinct parts: first, something must go wrong in some relationship (it could be as big as betrayal, or something as small as losing something you borrowed); second, the relationship has to be reconciled somehow; finally, the restored relationship has to show peace, not simply tolerance. The relationship can be anything from teammates to friends to siblings to parent-child. Have them create their scenes and then show them.

Discuss what patterns they saw. Is it common for relationships to involve hurt? Point out that whenever relationships are healed, someone almost always has to absorb the wrongdoing somehow. If something was lost, either the loser needs to replace it or the owner has to forgive the other; either the wrongdoer has to make things right, or the offended person has to absorb the hurt of that wrongdoing. In today's session, we'll see how Paul offers himself to absorb Onesimus's wrongdoing so he can be restored to Philemon. Jesus has absorbed our wrongdoing so we can have peace with God. Let's consider how we can make peace from the broken pieces of relationships in our lives.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Philemon 8-14.

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, a church leader, regarding Onesimus, Philemon's servant who had run away. Since Philemon had last seen Onesimus, his servant had come under Paul's discipleship and been transformed. We don't know much about Onesimus' past, but it wasn't good (v. 11). Whatever the situation was before, Onesimus was clearly a new man, changed by the gospel through his relationship with Paul. Although Paul had the apostolic authority to demand that Philemon receive Onesimus as a brother and treat him graciously, Paul chose to take a different approach. He appealed to love.

- **According to verse 10, what did God use to bring a change in Onesimus' life?**
- **Who are spiritual mentors in your life?**

Discipleship is all about relationship. It's not merely the transfer of information, but the development of a godly life. That kind of development is only possible through godly influences who invest in others and demonstrate a life of faith. Paul's faith and godliness "while in chains" (v. 10) provided a great example for Onesimus to learn how to live for Christ in the midst of socially difficult circumstances. We all need spiritual role models because these relationships are where lasting impact and change takes place.

Read Philemon 15-17.

Paul preferred for Onesimus to stay with him (v. 13), but to do so would have robbed Philemon of an opportunity to freely demonstrate Christian love (v. 14). Instead, Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with this personal letter in the hope that Philemon would see God's providential grace in his temporary loss (v. 15).

- **According to verse 16, how did Onesimus' conversion change his relationship with Philemon?**

In verse 16, the life-altering implications of the gospel are on full display. In Christ, Philemon and Onesimus are brothers, and it is this brotherly relationship that takes priority in how they should relate to one another. Our heavenly identity takes precedence in relationships more than our earthly social standing. All social structures take a backseat to kingdom identity; for kingdom identity is preeminent.

- **How should the concept of kingdom-identity change the way we relate to one another?**

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
The gospel calls us to treat each other like family.

Philemon 8-14

Ironically, Onesimus' name means "useful." So when Paul says, "he was useless to you, but now he is useful" (v. 11), he may be making a play on words. Paul is using a pun to say, "The person I am sending back to you is not the same person who ran away. The old guy was useless, but I'm sending Onesimus, a useful servant of Christ and our beloved brother."

"It is significant to note that Paul claims that in Christ, the useless person has been made useful. The last thing Christianity is designed to produce is vague, inefficient people; it produces people who are of use and can do a job better than they ever could if they did not know Christ. True Christianity makes a man heavenly-minded and useful upon earth at one and the same time."[1]

"In the end, it is Paul's courtesy and restraint which leaves the greatest impression here. Nor should we ignore the degree to which Paul's tactic reflects the social reality of his circumstances: If Philemon was a figure of social significance and power, then to press him over strongly with commands and threats might have been counterproductive in the loss of Philemon himself."[2]

Philemon 15-17

"One of the hidden delights of the Christian life is to see God working in marvelous, miraculous ways, revealing Himself in converging circumstances that cannot be explained by coincidence or chance."[3]

"What the letter of Philemon does is to bring the institution into an atmosphere where it could only wilt and die. Where master and slave were united in affection as brothers in Christ, formal emancipation would be but a matter of expediency, the legal confirmation of their new relationship."[4]

1. *William Barclay, The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).*
2. *James Douglas Grant Dunn, The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).*
3. *William MacDonald, The LLetters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon (Dubuque, IA: Emmaus Correspondence School, 2011).*
4. *F. F. Bruce, Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).*

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 56, DDG)

80. People of God

Scripture describes the church as "the people of God" (2 Cor. 6:16). Comprised of both Jew and Gentile, the church is created by God through the atoning death of Christ. The term "church" is used in two senses—of individual local churches composed of people who have covenanted together under the lordship of Christ and of the universal church composed of all believers in Christ in all times. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God's ruling care while we are protected and cared for by Him.

TEACHING PLAN

Kingdom identity means that social structures should not determine the nature of our relationships. No one's status, job title, or skills makes them superior to anyone else in God's family. God shows no partiality, so we shouldn't either. If you find yourself in a position of power or authority, humble yourself. If you find yourself in a weak or lowly position, lift your head. We may also learn from this letter that the responsibility to set the tone of the relationship rests primarily on the one who is socially powerful. Notice how Paul used his influence to speak up for Onesimus, and Philemon bore the responsibility to receive him as a brother. A brother who is socially weaker should not have to demand his equality; rather, the brother who has position, authority, or influence should use that power to treat him as a brother.

Read Philemon 18-22.

Paul wants Philemon to treat Onesimus the way God treated him, canceling debts and removing guilt. In the case that Philemon may be unwilling to do that, Paul shows his own love for both Onesimus and Philemon by offering to pay any debts himself. Although Paul obviously sees Philemon's temporary loss as larger gain (v. 15), he doesn't want Philemon to feel taken advantage of or carry an ongoing grudge over any outstanding debts. He offers to pay debts so that nothing may hinder Philemon from treating Onesimus as a brother. And yet, lest Philemon be tempted to have a spirit of keeping score, Paul quickly reminds him it's a loser's game (v. 19).

- **What can we learn from Paul's attempt to make things right?**

Here, Paul is doing what Christ did for us. Our greater sin debt is canceled, so we should not stress over lesser worldly debts. The Christian spirit should be to try to make things right. When we have wronged someone, we should do all that we can to correct the wrong that's been done. At the least, this includes confession and apology, but it may include more than that where physical loss has been suffered because of your actions. This shouldn't be done out of a heart that is trying to earn forgiveness; rather, it should be done out of love for the other person and a desire for what is just.

In Defense (p. 58, DDG)

"One final consideration has really...deepened my conviction that the Bible as a whole is utterly opposed to any form of slavery: the book of Philemon...Paul dissolves the slave/master relationship, and imposes in its place a brother/brother relationship, in which the former slave is treated with all the dignity that the apostle himself would be treated. Thus, even before the actual institution of slavery is abolished, the work of the gospel abolishes the assumptions and prejudices that make slavery possible...it shows how the logic of the gospel is utterly opposed to slavery."[5]

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
The gospel calls us to treat each other like family.

Philemon 18-22

"Here we see how Paul lays himself out for poor Onesimus, and with all his means pleads his cause with his master, and so sets himself as if he were Onesimus, and had himself done wrong to Philemon. Even as Christ did for us with God the Father, thus also does Paul for Onesimus with Philemon. We are all his Onesimi, if we believe."[6]

"There is something so Godlike in trying to put away discord, and to remove anger, and to promote love, that it makes men feel that peacemakers must be the children of God."[7]

"The thought of indebtedness reminded Paul of Philemon's spiritual debt to Paul. Paul had taken the gospel to Philemon. This reveals Paul's perspective regarding material and spiritual matters. Paul saw close relationships between each aspect of life, with the Lord in control of it all. Here that perspective surfaced again. Spiritual relationships predominate. If they were in order, other matters would take care of themselves. Even so, Paul was prepared to assume financial obligations in order to teach and live by spiritual truths. Reconciliation between Christians meant that much to him."[8]

Activity

Your students are probably familiar with FDA approval for food and drink; to apply today's lesson, we'll be creating stories that are "DFA" approved: discord, faith, accord.

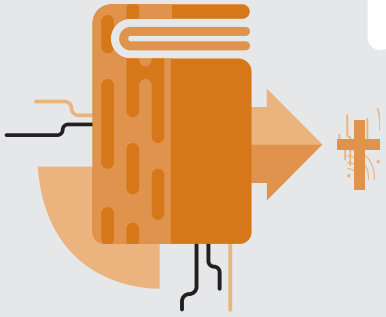
Alone or in small groups, your students will create short scenes with three distinct parts. First, their scene should show discord: at least two parties who are not getting along, probably because one has wronged the other. Second, they must show faith: at least one of the parties trusts Jesus and His promises, like Philemon had to trust Jesus to forgive and accept Onesimus. Third, they must show accord: the two separated parties are reunited in genuine love and grace as siblings in God's family, just like Philemon and Onisemus were siblings in the Lord.

Let them make and then show their "DFA-Approved" skits. Discuss if it was easy or hard to exercise faith to forgive and reconcile to the other person. If they are willing to share or consider, what real-life areas of discord exist in their lives? How can they bring faith to bear on them, so those relationships can move to accord?

5. *Gavin Ortlund, "Is the Bible Pro-Slavery?," Soliloquium, May 26, 2018, https://gavinortlund.com/2018/05/25/is-the-bible-pro-slavery/.*
6. *Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon, 1546 (1522)," in Luther's Works, Vol. 35, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1986), 390.*
7. *Charles Spurgeon, "Matthew 5 Commentary - Spurgeon's Verse Expositions of the Bible," StudyLight.org, 2011, https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/spe/matthew-5.html.*
8. *Richard R. Melick (2012). New American Commentary Vol 32: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon. B&H Publishing Group. Retrieved from https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com*

(p. 57, DDG) Christ Connection

When Paul appealed to Philemon on behalf of the runaway slave, Onesimus, he placed himself in the middle of their broken relationship. To make peace, Paul volunteered to pay Onesimus' debt. Through this action, Paul modeled Jesus Christ, who is the peacemaker between God and sinful humanity. By paying our debt, Jesus reconciled us to God and to each other.



LIVING IN GRACE

The gospel calls us to treat each other like family.

JESUS CONNECTION

Paul made peace between Onesimus, a runaway slave, and his master, Philemon. Paul offered to pay Onesimus' debt to heal their broken relationship. Paul's example points to Jesus Christ, who is the peacemaker between God and sinners. By paying our debt for sin, Jesus restores our relationship with God and others.

LIFEWISE QUALITY

FORGIVENESS – Erasing a debt that another person owes me.

HEAD

How had Onesimus wronged Philemon? How did Paul ask Philemon to respond?

How did Onesimus' decision to follow Christ change his relationship with Philemon?

HEART

Paul appealed to Philemon to forgive out of love, not because of some rules (vs. 8–9). Why is love a better foundation for forgiveness?

Paul was willing to pay any debt Onesimus owed to Philemon so Onesimus could be forgiven completely. God offers us forgiveness because Jesus took our punishment on the cross. How does this sacrificial gift inspire us to forgive and sacrifice for others?

HANDS

Forgiveness is only necessary when there has been hurt, and being hurt makes it very hard to forgive. But God models forgiveness for us and calls us to forgive as He has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). Think of a broken relationship in your life. Write down a short explanation of what happened between you. Now pray and tell God about the situation. Ask Him to help you see anything that you need to ask their forgiveness for and the strength to apologize. Then, do that this week. If you are the one who was wronged, ask God to help you to forgive them, even if they are unwilling to apologize right now.